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Ken Kesey, Jack Kerouac and a New American Religiosity

The Beat Generation of post WWII America is often associated with the counter-culture movement which led to the cultural developments of the 60s. In general Beats were typically characterized by a rejection of consumer culture and the regimentation and control of modern society. Ken Kesey is an author who is identified as being representative of this generation. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a novel by Kesey which provides insight into the philosophical mindset which defined a generation. Kesey's novel is representative of a line of thought within the Beat Generation, that the scientific and logical regimentation of capitalist society was creating a culture based on consumerism and was leading to corporate oppression. In the novel, the religious symbolism around the character R.P. McMurphy was not uncommon within philosophical rhetoric commonly employed by intellectuals of the Beat Generation. Ken Kesey employs religious metaphors in an attempt to represent the freeing of a person from the grasps of consumerism and the social constraints imposed by society.

Ken Kesey is not the only Beat author to employ religious symbolism in his attempts to represent transcendence of materialism and society. Jack Kerouac is another author who uses religious language and imagery to represent a philosophical rejection of consumerism and corporate oppression. In his semi-autobiographical novel, *On the Road*, Kerouac refers to his friend Dean as "having the energy of a new kind of American saint" (Kerouac 38) and again later while talking about a drive through South Carolina and Georgia he says, "All alone in the night I had my own thoughts and held the car to the white line in the holy road." Later in the same paragraph, he refers to his journey as a "pilgrimage" (Kerouac 140). This language was used by Kerouac intentionally, much in the way Kesey uses religious

symbolism. While Chief Bromden is introducing the chronics, the patients who had been turned into vegetables by the mental institution, he says that Ellis is a chronic who is “nailed against the wall in the same condition they lifted him off the table for the last time, in the same shape, arms out, palms cupped”(Kesey 15) indirectly evoking Christian imagery, and not for the last time, when referring to the “shock shop” table. Bromden introduces another chronic, Ruckley, who was causing trouble on the ward. He states that Ruckley “was being a holy nuisance all over the place”(Kesey 15). Kesey represents Nurse Ratched ironically as an “angel of mercy”(Kesey 55) repeatedly throughout the novel and the Acutes begin to think of McMurphy as their savior. This image of McMurphy as a Christ figure is again reinforced by his eventual sacrifice for the good of all on the ward. When McMurphy is sent for electroshock treatment he is laid upon the cross-like “Shock Room” table and he says “Anointest my head with conductant. Do I get a crown of thorns?”(Kesey 244). The religious symbolism in both *On The Road* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* is representative of the Beat Generation’s philosophical views and how they viewed their actions. Their rebellion against commercialized society was viewed as similar to what Enlightenment thinkers did during the 17th and 18th century.

The Enlightenment period is relevant to Beat philosophy because, during the enlightenment, intellectuals supported a society based on science and logic rather than religious oppression of rational thought. The Beat Generation viewed themselves as forming a new kind of religiosity which worshipped freedom of the mind and body over oppressive scientific dogma. In a *College Literature* article, author Allan Johnston communicates this thought effectively; he states that the use of religious symbolism

reflect a broader process of cultural totalization that has been underway since the Enlightenment. According to Theodor W Adorno and Max Horkheimer, the liberating power of reason first felt in the Enlightenment elevation of reason and science over restrictive religious dogma has turned on itself as reason, in dialectical ascendance, has itself become dogmatic and oppressive via its validation of technical efficiency over all other qualities.(Johnston

Johnston argues that the pursuit of rational solutions to all things had evolved to reduce the human experience to that of merely a means of production. This concept is greatly demonstrated by Chief Bromden's delusional world view of the Combine. Essentially, Kesey is using the religious symbolism both as a reference to dogmatic religious oppression, which was overthrown by the Enlightenment thinkers, as well as a metaphor to communicate the spiritual liberation of the body and mind which McMurphy brings to the Ward. The Combine, which Bromden is convinced Nurse Ratched is attempting to integrate people into, is a metaphor for the technological and scientific world which had come to dominate American society. Johnston states that this had progressed to such an extent that "life has become increasingly totalized as a series of exchange relations in which humans largely serve as means of production and consumption"(Johnston 106). McMurphy represents within the novel a savior of the members of the Ward, particularly Bromden. He shows up having been rejected by society and thrown into prison, and a work farm, and now a mental ward. He immediately laughs upon entering, challenges the order of things and takes over, meanwhile resisting the attempts of an orderly to take his temperature.

McMurphy's constant presentation of sex and the restrictive nature of Nurse Ratched's finely pressed uniform also represent a part of the Beat Generation's philosophical desire to free the mind and body. They viewed 1950's social stigma surrounding sex as another encroachment upon the nature of what it means to be human. So if McMurphy represented the philosophical savior of the patients of the mental ward according to what is understood to be typical Beat philosophy, then religious symbolism within *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* must symbolize a new type of religiosity as a critic of oppression within greater American society. McMurphy ultimately died for his sins against the Combine, but ultimately his attempts at shaking up the accepted order of things ultimately allowed patients on Nurse Ratched's ward to free themselves from the mental ailments they suffered from.

Kesey represents his philosophical beliefs through irony and religious symbolism. Through Bromden's world view, and his transformation with the introduction of Randal Patrick McMurphy, Kesey presents a philosophy which provides insight into the Beat Generation's reactionary philosophy to the societal pressures of the 1950s. His religious

symbolism is similarly used by fellow Beat Jack Kerouac and is representative of their concept of a spiritualism involved in story and physical experience over repetitive regimental life. Ken Kesey feared that the continued reduction of humanity into units of production was destroying the spiritual experience of life. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a novel that suggests a new kind of American religiosity which celebrates freedom of both the mind and body and rejects what the Beat Generation writers would likely refer to as “mass culture”.

Works Cited

Kerouac, Jack. *On The Road*. New York: Penguin Books, 2007. Print.

Kesey, Ken. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. Print

Johnston, Allan. "Consumption, Addiction, Vision, Energy: Political Economies and Utopian Visions in the Writings of the Beat Generation" *College Literature* 32.2 (Spring 2005): 103-126. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 4 April 2013.